

Paying for war

Posted By [Stanley Kober](#) On February 23, 2010 @ 12:00 am In [Opinion](#), [Opinion:Lower Section](#) | [No Comments](#)

On Dec. 1, President Barack Obama announced an increase in troop deployments to Afghanistan, and the budget he recently submitted increases spending to pay for the “surge.” This increased military effort has prompted calls for a special war tax, not only to pay for the war but to better connect American citizens to those who are fighting on their behalf.

Although the idea has been generally dismissed, it revives a proposal offered by James Madison shortly after the founding of the United States. Madison believed that the people—and not a single individual, not even an elected president—should be entrusted with the war power.

The other Founders shared that view, which is why they put the war power in the hands of Congress, and not with the president. Even Alexander Hamilton emphatically agreed, emphasizing in the Federalist No. 69 that the president has “a right to command the military and naval forces” while the King of Great Britain “in addition to this right, possesses that of *declaring war.*”

But Madison also realized that such a constraint would not work all the time, that sometimes the people themselves would want a war. To restrain wars that accord “with the will of the society itself,” as he put it in a 1792 essay on “[Universal Peace](#) ^[1],” he proposed what amounts to a war tax.

“Each generation should be made to bear the burden of its own wars, instead of carrying them on at the expense of other generations,” he argued. “Were a nation to impose such restraints on itself ... an ample reward would accrue to the State—first, from the avoidance of all its wars of folly; secondly, from the vigor of its unwasted resources for wars of necessity and defense.”

Madison’s analysis speaks directly to our current situation. Flush with what appeared to be an easy victory in Afghanistan, we launched a war against Iraq, which proved to be a lot more difficult—and expensive—than originally expected. The diversion of attention and resources to Iraq allowed the Taliban to regroup in Afghanistan. Now the Obama administration is trying to redirect the U.S. effort to Afghanistan, but its options are limited, in large part because of the fatigue of people who have been at war for years on end.

President Obama is struggling with the legacy of overconfidence that accompanied the end of the Cold War. We thought our power had triumphed, and that we could now use our power to bring democracy to troubled parts of the world, just as we thought we had brought it to Russia. We would overcome the defeatism of Vietnam and foster world peace through our benevolent hegemony.

But that was a tremendous misreading of the end of the Cold War. Although our power was not an insignificant factor, our values and institutions were at least as important. It is striking, for example, to read Soviet accounts praising the American system of legislative control over the war power and suggesting the USSR could benefit from the American example. According to a 1988 article in *Izvestia*, “it is difficult now to imagine a government in any highly developed country with an effectively operating parliamentary system of control over executive power being politically capable” of military aggression.

Alas, those days are long gone. The hopes we had for the spread of democracy when the Cold War ended now seem somewhat naive. But they were real, and we should not abandon them. But we should also recognize that our example is important, and we should always be conscious of the example we are setting.

This was, indeed, what Madison was promoting. “Were all nations to follow the example [of the war tax], the reward would be doubled to each, and the temple of Janus might be shut, never to be opened more,” he concluded. We should contemplate “a reform of every government subjecting its will to that of the people, in a subjection of each generation to the

payment of its own debts, and in a substitution of a more palpable, in place of an imperceptible mode of paying them, the only hope of UNIVERSAL AND PERPETUAL PEACE.”

Perhaps Madison was a dreamer, but the United States was created on such a dream. Novus Ordo Seclorum—we were to be a new order for the ages. That is our charge; that is our legacy. We should honor it or explain to succeeding generations, and the world at large, why we feel it should no longer be respected.

Stanley Kober is a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

Article printed from The Daily Caller – Breaking News, Opinion, Research, and Entertainment:
<http://dailycaller.com>

URL to article: **<http://dailycaller.com/2010/02/23/paying-for-war/>**

URLs in this post:

[1] Universal Peace: **http://olldownload.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1941&chapter=124396&layout=html&Itemid=27**

Copyright © 2009 Daily Caller. All rights reserved.